

ELT Textbook Evaluation in Iran, New Insights

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Abstract

Textbooks hold a paramount status as an indispensable ingredient of language teaching profession; therefore, appraising and evaluating them seems to be imperative to assure their efficiency and consistency with the objectives defined and expected of the course. The current study was an effort to evaluate suitability of the English textbook developed by Iranian Education Ministry for pre-university course. To this end, a modified version of World Language Standards-Based Textbook Evaluation Form developed by Indiana Department of Education (2007) was utilized. The questionnaire was passed out among 30 male and female English teachers in pre-university centers. The form extracted teachers' outlooks on seven major criteria including gender representation, communication, culture, connections, comparisons, communities, and general elements pertaining to areas like skills, language components, attraction of the activities and the like. The findings showed the moderate level of complacency with the textbook with reference to teachers' perspectives. Nevertheless, the salient drawback with the book was its inadequacy in culture presentation. Further, t-test computed for male and female EFL teachers' attitudes indicated that gender played no significant role in this regard. The study ends with some suggestion to improve on the textbook.

Keywords: ELT textbook evaluation in Iran, Iranian Pre-university textbook, Textbook evaluation checklist.

Introduction

Although wide exploitation of technology and virtual learning has captured all areas of language teaching and learning, textbooks live on as a pivotal ingredient of language teaching (See Rivers, 1968; Ur, 1997; Skierso, 1991; Bruton, 1997; Tomlinson, 2001, Aliakbari and Jamalvandi, 2012, to name a few). As Skierso (1991) maintains, teachers hardly handle teaching without relying on a textbook. The convincing reasons Ansari and babaii (2002) put forth are likewise noteworthy. To them, the absence of textbook can mean aimlessness in learners' views; a textbook can serve as a tool for managing the time of teaching; and it can act as a source of security and guidance for novice teachers. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), ELT (English Language Teaching) textbooks play the role of a teacher, a map, a resource, a restrictor, and as an ideology. Additionally, Richards and Renandya (2002) believe in active part a textbook plays in what they term as "social routinization", meaning classroom interaction which turns stereotyped to shrink the stress and unpredictability. Further, as Cunningsworth (1995) contends, a textbook can be a source of activities, a syllabus for pushing the teaching/learning process toward systematization, and as a scaffold for novice teachers. Still others refer to textbooks in tandem with innovation, students' needs, issues related to money and time (Hutchinson and Torres, 1994 and O'Niel, 1982). Developing socialization and cultural reproduction stands as another important function textbooks are expected to fulfill (Seliker, 2007).

And, in the eye of Richards and Rodgers (2001), the functions for materials encompass objectives, content, learning activities, and learner and teacher roles. Having presented arguments for the significant part of textbooks in teaching learning process, one can figure out the necessity for assessing and studying this substantial component of language teaching profession. Endorsing this requisite, Tomlinson (2001) looks at studying materials as a bridge linking different areas of sociolinguistics, language acquisition, discourse analysis and pragmatics as well as the effectiveness of materials.

Having considered what argued above, the current study made an empirical attempt to reconsider the extent to which ELT textbook devised for Iranian pre-university applicants is responsive to the real needs of learners. It is hence hoped this study would discover new dimensions in association with the textbook and help to exert improvement on it if required.

Statement of the problem

As stated earlier, textbooks reflect and move toward realization of goals intended by a curriculum; therefore, the success or failure of any educational program hinge on textbooks along with other integral components. To guarantee the efficiency of a textbook and whether it covers the expected features, it is vital to evaluate it against an inventory of standards. Further, textbooks evaluation is a continuous process, not confined to a time period or research studies. This study, accordingly, planned to assess the book entitled Learning to Read, English for Pre-University Students parts 1&2 (Birjandi et al, 2000) developed by Iran Ministry for Education. The reason for working on this textbook lies in the fact that it is rather recent, in comparison to other three ELT textbooks published for Iranian high school level, and has turned out as a radical permutation of the previous textbook for pre-university students. Hence, it is thought that it would demand more attention and assessment. Moreover, to date, few studies have addressed the textbook for the purpose of a thorough evaluation; many inquiries focused on a single dimension while assessing ELT textbooks in Iran, e.g. culture (Aliakbari, 2005), pronunciation and grammar (Azizifar, et al, 2010), authenticity (Abdullahi-Guilani, et al, 2011), and gender bias (Amini & birjandi, 2012). It is thus hoped that the results of this study would open up new dimensions for the benefit of teachers, students, and material developers. The current survey is, therefore, exclusively seeking for answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent do Iranian EFL teachers believe the ELT textbook for pre-university course can fulfill the *needs of the learners*?
2. To what extent is *gender* represented equally in Iranian ELT textbook for pre-university students?
3. To what extent is *communication* aspect included in the textbook?
4. To what extent is *culture* contained in the textbook?
5. To what extent does the content follow a logical *connection*?
6. To what extent does the book make *comparisons* between source and target language?
7. To what extent is the book able to *connect* learners with the real world?
8. To what extent are *general elements* encompassed in the textbook?
9. Does the *gender* of Iranian EFL teachers make any difference in their evaluation of the ELT textbook for pre-university students?

Iranian Educational System

At present, Iranian educational system requires that students spend 5 years in primary school, three years in junior highschool, 3 years in highschool to receive diploma, and two semesters to terminate their pre-university course before they apply for higher education. Iranian students initiate learning English as soon as they enter grade one in junior highschool and continue it until the end of pre-university course.

Literature Review

As to the application of textbooks, there exist two opposing standpoints. At one side of the argument are those who find fault with textbooks as they are believed to include dilemmas in areas like sexism, stereotyping, gender bias, and other problems (Porreca, 1984; Clarke, 1990; Renner, 1997) whereas the advocates on the other side which outweigh the first group put emphasis on the vital role of textbooks and their advantages (Rivers, 1968; Ur, 1997; Jahangard, 2008, to name a few). Despite the fact that no comprehensive book can be developed, as Grant (1987) argues, to assure the efficiency of materials presented to a course, it would certainly be crucial to assess them applying pertinent criteria. This, of course, must be a constant and organized undertaking rather than as a one-shot activity. Speaking in favor of textbooks evaluation, Sheldon (1988) resorted to two reasons: to decide on an appropriate book and to acquaint teachers with merits and demerits of the textbook. Underlining the function of textbooks as one of the four factors in ELT, i.e. teacher, learner, textbooks, and context, Razmjoo (2010) contended that in Iranian educational system, unlike some systems, the choice on textbooks is not made by teachers and they are required to teach the course book introduced to them; therefore, it is strongly important to evaluate such materials so that shortcomings and weaknesses would be uncovered and their quality could be enriched.

Literature on ELT textbook evaluation renders a great number of studies having looked at the issue from a different angle and they have made use of various criteria and standards. The next two paragraphs report several investigations done both in Iran and abroad.

Litz (1997) conducted a case study on ELT textbooks in South Korea. In his detailed and thorough analysis not only did he take into account skills, content, tasks, but he appraised cost, availability, authors and publisher's credentials, layout and design and packages and websites related to the book evaluated. Setting aside the negligible shortcomings, the textbook under investigation was shown to enjoy far more positive characteristics and it was able to suit the needs of the Korean learners. Multi-skills syllabus, clear and logical organization of the book, inclusion of teaching strategies, and vocabulary skills were among the positive traits of the book.

Another relevant inquiry in Turkey by Çakit (2006) explored students and teachers' perspectives on the textbook for ninth grade high school students. Applying eleven criteria the investigation reported that both groups of participants held negative notions regarding majority of the features of the book. The most salient issues the paper proposed included the need for simplifying reading passages in terms of vocabulary and structures, adjusting the level of materials with the age of learners and taking into account different learning styles preferred by learners.

Evaluating ELT textbooks is fairly young in Iran, and studies conducted on materials developed for students have disclosed valuable faucets. This process is, of course, naturally not supposed to stop at one station and runs on so that new insights and horizons would be configured. Here are presented several projects on ELT textbook evaluation implemented in Iran. The study by Zohrabi, et al (2012) evaluated the merits and demerits of English for high school freshmen in Iran from the viewpoints of teachers and students. They focused on seven sections of layout, vocabulary, topics and content, exercises, skills, pronunciation, function, and social and cultural activities. The results of the investigation pointed out that the book was grammar-oriented and more emphasis was placed on reading more than three other skills; insufficient practice was provided for pronunciation; with respect to target culture, no social and cultural activities were included; and the layout of the book was believed to lack beauty.

In separate studies, Yarmohammadi (2002) and Abdollahi- Guilani, et al (2011) investigating Iranian ELT textbooks came to conclusions that the course books developed for Iranian schools are far from authenticity. Moreover, there exists no correspondence between actual needs of students and the presented materials. Further, Abdollahi-Guilani, et al (ibid) found no ties between outside

world and the world outside the readers in ELT textbooks in Iran, the materials unchanged and unrevised for years. A different examination by Riazi and Mosalanejad (2010) on learning objectives in ELT textbooks displayed the prevalence of low-order cognitive skills more than higher-order ones. They also pointed to the absence of harmony between the first three books in high school with pre-university course book. In addition to multi-faceted studies on ELT textbook evaluation, there are research projects which have addressed a single dimension, e.g. gender, culture, skills, etc. For instance, regarding the role of gender in Iranian ELT textbooks, Amini and Birjandi (2012) based their investigation on five scales including visibility, firstness, generic masculine contractions, sex-linked professions, and activities. In all areas the survey revealed that gender was treated in an unfair and imbalanced fashion with greater bias toward males. Finally, addressing the place of culture in Iranian ELT textbooks, Aliakbari (2005) unfolded the underrepresentation of cultural elements in the four course books adopted for high school students. The books, as he concluded, were superficial in terms of culture presentation and hence unable to drive learners toward enriching their intercultural communication and understanding. To take a fresh but different look at the ELT textbook in Iran, the present article was shaped in the hope of unveiling more aspects regarding how well ELT textbook developed for pre-university course tunes with the criteria and standards such materials are commonly weighed against and in fact how far they would cater for learners' needs.

Methodology

Design and instrument

The design of this inquiry was grounded on a descriptive survey. The evaluation was conducted on the basis of the World Language Standards-Based Textbook Evaluation Form developed by Indiana Department of Education (2007). Before the final implementation of the research, a pilot study was carried out. The results of piloting led to applying some modifications. As an instance, it was initially decided that both teachers and students participate in the study but the latter group were found unable to fully grasp the ideas presented to them by the questionnaire; as a result, they were removed from the study. The checklist went through some modifications, as well. The place of gender was missing in the original form, so gender representation was also included. Further, the value of Likert scale was a bit changed ranging from little to a great deal. The seven criteria to be judged by the participants included: gender, culture, communication, comparison, connection, communities and general elements. Besides, another item was added to the questionnaire to consider the participants' overall evaluation of the textbook. The criteria are made clear in the next paragraph.

Gender was studied in the textbook so as to see whether male and female names and pronouns have been included equally. *Communication*, as another criterion, dealt with areas like the quality of opportunities provided for learners to communicate with each other and their teacher as well as activities related to different skills. Next, *culture* turned around the inclusion of culture in the images, text, activities, exercises of the book. *Connections* coped with creating opportunities for learners to discuss the concepts and topics of the book in other areas and effectiveness of technology in boosting instruction. As the next criterion, *comparisons* attempted to consider the use of cognates, idiomatic expressions, and culture in source and target language. Further, *communities* was out forth in order to appraise the presence of chances for learners to enjoy a long life learning and explore whether language/culture projects with the aim of involving learners in interactions with native speakers along with issues like social justice and equity are covered by the textbook. Finally, *general elements* investigated the appeal of the book, its activities, usefulness of the activities, and the balanced treatment of four skills.

Participants

Thirty (30) male and female English teachers having experienced teaching in either state or non-state pre-university centers in the province of Ilam in Iran were sampled for the purpose of the study. The participants varied between 10 and 30 years of record in their career. Out of thirty teachers, 18 held B.A. in English literature and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), and the rest had M.A. degrees in TEFL, English literature and general linguistics.

Materials

The materials evaluated by the present investigation was the book entitled Learning to Read, English for Pre-University Students parts 1&2 (Birjandi, et al, 2000) published by Iranian Ministry of Education. The book contains eight chapters with four chapters covered for a single semester. Each chapter follows a pre-reading part, a reading passage and a post reading section which presents various activities and exercise associated with the main text both orally and in written. Each lesson ends with Focus on Grammar section.

Procedure

To elicit teachers' views on the fitness and adequacy of the ELT textbook for Iranian pre-university students, the questionnaire was handed out to the participants available and those not in reach received the questionnaire through email (Sept. 2012). Within a month the questionnaires were returned for analysis.

Data collection and analysis

To analyze the data gathered, both descriptive and inferential statistics were applied. As to descriptive statistics, initially frequency and percentage were calculated for the whole responses. The data tabulation was provided for any of the criteria under the present study. Throughout this section the items will be explained in turn. In inferential statistics section, using SPSS software 19, independent t-test was run to compare male and female EFL teachers' attitudes toward the textbook. As mentioned before, there were eight criteria this survey attempted to quest in the book. The results of data analysis come in the following section.

The first question of the study was to find about Iranian EFL teachers' views on the extent to which ELT pre-university textbook fulfill the real needs of the students. As Table 1 below portrays, more than 60 percent of the respondents expressed that the book is able to provide real needs of learners moderately while 20 percent thought of the issue in poor condition and 16.6 percent believed in satisfactory provision of learners' needs by the book.

Table 1. Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs on fulfilling the needs of the learners by preuniversity ELT textbook

	Little	Average	Much	Total
Frequency	6	19	5	30
Percent	20	63.3	16.6	100.0

Table 2. Gender representation in Iranian ELT book for preuniversity course

	Little	Average	Much	Total
Frequency	4	15	11	30
Percent	13.3	50.0	36.7	100.0

To explore how gender has been represented in the book, the first criterion extracted participants' attitudes toward this aspect. As Table 2. reveals, half of the respondents (50 %)

believed that the book holds an average treatment in characterization of generic names and pronouns while 36 percent of the teachers thought gender representation is to a great extent balanced and only 13.3 percent of the sample marked little on the questionnaire.

Table 3. shows the participants' reactions over the role of the book in association with communications. Based on the results obtained, a remarkable number of the subjects (60 percent) were of the belief that the ELT materials provide pre-university students with adequate opportunities for developing their communicative skills. Approximately one third of the sample (30 %) strongly supported the idea put forth and as much as 10 percent of subjects found little room for communicative function of the book.

Table 3. Realization of *communications* in Iranian ELT book for preuniversity course

	Little	Average	Much	Total
Frequency	3	18	9	30
Percent	10.0	60.0	30.0	100.0

The next item to be investigated was culture treatment throughout the ELT textbook for pre-university students. Drawing on Table 4, one can succinctly see that over 46 percent of the whole sample turned out to be of the notion that the place of culture in the ELT textbook is poor while, with a slight difference, 40 percent of the respondents viewed culture in the materials as averagely treated. And, 13.3 percent of the population favored the satisfactory inclusion of culture in the course book.

Table 4. *Culture presentation* in Iranian ELT book for preuniversity course

	Little	Average	Much	Total
Frequency	14	12	4	30
Percent	46.7	40.0	13.3	100.0

Table 5 illustrates the logical connections of various parts of the book and also its link with learners' background knowledge from the standpoints of teachers. A majority of respondents (83.3 %) reacted moderately to this criterion and the rest (16.7 %) believed the book holds logical connections to a great extent.

Table 5. Provision of *connections* in Iranian ELT book for preuniversity course

	Little	Average	Much	Total
Frequency	0	25	5	30
Percent	0	83.3	16.7	100.0

As to another scale entitled comparison, the table below represents the highest share (43.3 percent) belonging to the participants who asserted the book satisfies the comparison feature in an average fashion while 30 percent of the subjects found the book imperfect in terms of this characteristic and more than 26 percent of respondents believed in high fulfillment of the book with reference to comparison.

Table 6. Inclusion of *comparison* in Iranian ELT book for preuniversity course

	Little	Average	Much	Total
Frequency	9	13	8	30
Percent	30.0	43.3	26.7	100.0

Item 7 discloses the sample views on another feature meant by the present study, namely communities, the ties the textbook is expected to create between the learners and the real world outside. As shown, the greatest number of the participants (43.3 %) were of the opinion that the textbook caters in average for learners' need to construct the bridge between the content and their real experience and knowledge outside the book. 33.3 percent of the subjects held the notion that communities is highly provided and 23.3 percent believed in poor inclusion of this dimension by the book.

Table 7. *Communities* in Iranian ELT book for preuniversity course

	Little	Average	Much	Total
Frequency	7	13	10	30
Percent	23.3	43.3	33.3	100.0

The last section investigated by the current study pertains to general elements covering skills, grammar, the quality of attention the book pays to critical thinking, and so on. On the basis of the statistics given in Table 8, most of the respondents (73.3 %) pronounced that the elements are addressed adequately by the course book. Incomparably, 20 percent of the subjects highly supported the idea and a minority of participants (6.7 %) considered the issue to be weakly dealt with by the book.

Table 8. Actualization of *general elements* in Iranian ELT book for preuniversity course

	Little	Average	Much	Total
Frequency	2	22	6	30
Percent	6.7	73.3	20	100.0

Table 9. T-test computed to compare Iranian EFL male and female teachers' evaluation of the pre-university ELT textbook.

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Score Equal Variances assumed	.032	.849	.532	57	.587	.0657	.12433	.18412	.31745
			.532	56.649	.587	.0657	.12433	.18415	.31748
Score Equal Variances not assumed									

The last question the study tried to answer was whether there is any difference in Iranian male and female EFL teachers' evaluation of ELT textbook for pre-university course. In doing so, independent t-test was used to compare the two sets of means. As the table below represents, the

value of Sig. value goes greater than alpha of 0.05 [0.59 (when rounded) $> \alpha = 0.05$] which supports the fact that there is no significant difference found between Iranian male and female EFL teachers in their evaluation of the ELT textbook for pre-university course.

Discussion

As cited previously, the central question of the study associated with the fact that how far the ELT textbook developed for the use of Iranian pre-university students is able to cater for their real needs. On the basis of the responses the participants provided, one can understand that majority (63%) of the respondents were of the idea that the intended materials meets the needs of Iranian pre-university students at an average level, not optimally realized though. The second criterion put forth through this study was the quality of gender presentation in the ELT textbook. It is clear from the data that exactly half of the respondents stated that the place of generic names and pronouns is of a moderate state. Over one third (36.7 %) thought the materials deal greatly equally with gender appearance while 13.3 percent believed in little equality of this element throughout the book.

Appraising how far the course book under study provides students with opportunities for contextualizing and making use of English for communication revealed that a majority of the subjects (60 %) were of the view this function has been averagely fulfilled by the textbook. This item, however, received 30 percent of total responses by those who affirmed high level of developing communication skills embodied in the ELT course book and a minority of the sample (10 %) found the book to be poor in this regard. The next facet examined was culture and its manifestation in the textbook. Based on the findings, over 46 percent of the respondents said that there is little room for introducing cultural aspects and enriching learners' cultural knowledge on the part of the textbook while 40 percent believed in moderate inclusion of culture and only 13.3 percent of the subjects considered this item as greatly supplied by the course book. Data analysis on logical connection of different sections of the book as well as its relationship with background knowledge of learners showed that a considerable number of the respondents (83.3 %) marked the average level of realizing this dimension by the book and the rest (16.7 %) asserted it is attained to a great extent.

Item 5 attempted to draw out the attitudes of the sample on the extent to which the book has included instances of students' mother tongue in comparison to English. As the results illustrate, most of the subjects (43.3 %) thought the book contains an average level of comparing source and target languages. As much as 30 percent of the respondents regarded the comparison aspect of the textbook as provided little whereas 26.7 percent of the sample took it as greatly included by the intended book. To uncover the respondents' outlooks on communities aspect, the findings displayed they (40 %) mostly were of the stance that the textbook has allocated average attention to the link between the content and the real world outside as well as long-term goals the book is expected to embrace. 33.3 percent of the subjects declared the book contains a great deal of room for communities function while the rest (23.3 %) held that this element is supplied weakly across the textbook. The last scale extracted the respondents on general instances including the quality of representing four skills, exercise on grammar, fostering critical thinking and attractiveness of the content to learners. Relying on the findings, one can see a large number of the subjects (73.3 %) believed such general elements are averagely represented and 20 percent of them said these components are included greatly in the textbook. In contrast, a negligible number of the respondents (6.7 %) came up with the notion that the provision of general elements by textbook is little.

Conclusion

On the basis of participants responses, it can be concluded that, except for cultural element, Iranian pre-university teachers hold the view that the ELT textbook developed for Iranian pre-

university students, moderately if not fully, is able to cater for the criteria relying on which the textbook was evaluated. As to gender coverage in firstness and frequency, the participants thought that it is fairly equal throughout the textbook. Likewise, the course book, as the participants assessed, holds features enabling pre-university students to bolster their communicative abilities. The only shortcoming found with the textbook is its inadequacy as to acquaint students with cultural aspects visually or in written, including different dialects and accents, English speaking countries, the relationship between culture and language. This very finding goes with the inquiry Aliakbari (2005) conducted on culture in Iranian ELT textbooks where they were shown to be poor in culture presentation. Examining another criterion namely connections revealed the textbook sufficiently paves the way for learners' bridging past and present experiences, enhancing their critical thinking, linking the content with outer world, updating the information, and finding logical connection in various parts of the book. Further, the textbook is considered to allocate enough room for comparing and contrasting learners' mother tongue with the target language. As far as the criterion of communities is concerned, the participants moderately held that the textbook is capable to drive learners to make use of what they acquire from the target language either in or out of the class setting. The last criterion against which the textbook was appraised was general elements. The participants thought that the textbook provides adequate contextualization of grammar and vocabulary as well as balanced attention to four skills. The book is also believed to have visual appeal to learners. A major finding this study arrived at was the fact that the gender of Iranian male and female EFL teachers left no significant difference in their appraisal of the textbook in pre-university level.

All in all, unlike the ELT textbooks for high school freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and the previous version of the textbook for pre-university applicants which were reported to be suffering from various shortcomings (See, for example, Zohrabi, et al, 2012; Amini & Birjandi, 2012; Aliakbari, 2005; and Yarmohammadi, 2002), the present textbook, according to the current investigation, meets moderately almost all the intended criteria. The mere pitfall found with ELT textbook for Iranian pre-university students is its insufficient provision of cultural elements. It, accordingly, seems to be essential that this aspect be revisited and reconsidered by the Ministry of Education and those in charge of developing ELT materials for pre-university level so that learners would be able to reinforce their cultural awareness and understanding of the target language.

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